

Friend of God: Mary McLeod Bethune
Isaiah 49:1-7, Matthew 4:12-23
January 20, 2008

From the moment of her birth, Mary Jane McLeod was known as a “different” child. The midwife who delivered her declared to her mother, “She’s different, Patsy. She came with her eyes wide open. She’ll see things before they happen.” To the neighbor women who called the baby “homely,” her mother stoutly replied, “She is a child of prayer. I asked the Master to send us a child who would show us the way out. Of course, I expected He would bless us with a boy. But His will be done.” Grandmother Sophia, rocking back and forth, puffing on her corncob pipe, murmured, “Thank you, Master, for another grandchild. This is a different one. Thank you, Master.”

Mary was the fifteenth child of 17 born to Patsy and Samuel McLeod. She was born July 10, 1875, in Mayesville, South Carolina, the first of the McLeod children to be born “free.” Her older siblings had been sold into slavery, but Mary Jane was born after the Emancipation.

One day while her mother delivered laundry to a white family, the children showed Mary their playhouse. Mary was looking over the books. “Put that book down, Mary Jane,” said the elder little girl. “Come over here and I’ll show you some pictures. Put the book down. You can’t read.”

Mary Jane did as she was told. She put the book down and looked at the pictures. But what she wanted to do was read. And from that moment on, she was determined to get an education. She went home and prayed aloud to God for somebody to teach her to read and write.

One September Mary’s prayer was answered. Miss Emma Wilson had been sent by the Mission Board of the Northern Presbyterian Church to start a school for black children in Mayesville. On the first day of school, Miss Wilson opened the Bible study to John 3:16 and read, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

With those words, Mary recalled, “The scales fell from my eyes and the light came flooding in. My sense of inferiority, my fear of handicaps, dropped away. Whosoever, it said. No Jew or Gentile, no Catholic or Protestant, no black or white; just ‘whosoever.’ It meant that I, a humble Negro girl, had just as much chance as anybody in the sight and love of God. These words stored up a battery of faith and confidence and determination in my heart, which has not failed me to this day....”

Everything Mary McLeod Bethune accomplished after that was an expression of gratitude for that day. She completed her training at that school in four years, received a certificate upon graduation, and became a member of the Presbyterian Church.

Her schooling continued at Scotia Seminary, a school for black girls at Concord, North Carolina. A schoolteacher in Colorado, who used her extra earnings as a seamstress to help a child who would benefit from higher education, paid for her tuition. Upon graduation from Scotia at the age of 19, her sponsor paid for an additional year of schooling at the Mission Training School of the Moody Bible Institute.

Upon leaving school, Mary possessed a strong desire to serve as a missionary in Africa. She was inspired both by religion and by her heritage: her mother had come from a matriarchal

tribe and royal African ancestry. After several unsuccessful attempts to go to Africa, Mary decided that her primary mission was in America.

Mary chose to give back as an educator some of the opportunity that had been given to her. She returned to her hometown to teach for a year in the little mission school where she had received her start. Mary continued to receive teaching assignments from the Presbyterian Mission Board, but she did far more than teach the students. She performed social service, reaching out to the families of her students and others in her neighborhood. She instilled confidence that would enable them to rise up out of the slums in which they were trapped to a new and better life for themselves.

Mary had not given much thought to her own life since she began teaching, but a young man in the church choir caught her attention. Her courtship with Alberthus Bethune culminated in their marriage in May of 1898. Their only child, a son, Albert McLeod Bethune, was born the next year. He was the ninetieth grandchild born to Mary's parents.

Mary continued teaching and social work, but she had a dream that called her beyond. She knew that the status of black women was lower than that of white women. She believed this inequality could not be rectified until they were provided with the same educational opportunities. Mary wanted to start a school for black girls.

Mary headed to Daytona, Florida, to begin making her dream come true. She rented a two-story building owned by a black man for eleven dollars a month. Before she could send for her husband and son, she received a letter from Alberthus saying that their cottage had burned down. Everything – furniture, books, papers, and personal belongings – had been destroyed. Mary started her new home and her school with no equipment or supplies of any kind. The empty shell of a schoolhouse lacked everything, everything that is but faith. It was a mission founded on faith.

The Daytona Literacy and Industrial School for Training Negro Girls was opened in October 1904 with five students. The name proved too much for the community to comprehend so it was shortened to simply The School. The hope was that each student would pay tuition of 50 cents a week. The school soon became a boarding school for girls whose mothers were maids who had to go away for a season with their white families. Neighbors, most of whom were illiterate, showed increasing interest in the school. Mary offered to hold evening classes for them if they would supply the lanterns. Those who were able contributed a dollar a week. Late at night Mary baked sweet potato pies to sell to construction workers early in the morning to raise money to feed her own family and her boarders. The adults in her class gave her the names and addresses of their wealthy white employers and she knocked on their doors, garnering financial and moral support for the school.

A plot of land that had become a dumping ground was purchased for a permanent school site. Mrs. Bethune's students cleared the dump and prepared the property for building. A Board of Trustees was established for the school, headed by James M. Gamble, of Proctor and Gamble. In October 1907, though only partially finished, the school moved into its new residence.

Mary took advantage of the fact that Daytona was a tourist town. She took a quartet and a choir of girls to perform at the hotels where offerings of \$150 or more were collected, a sum that seemed like a million to Mary. Those entertained at hotels included Carnegies,

Frothinghams, Mellons, Ballantines, and Rockefellers. Mr. Thomas White, president of the White Sewing Machine Company and manufacturer of the White Steamer automobiles, became one of her staunchest supporters. Upon his death, he left an enormous endowment for the school. The new administration building was dedicated in his honor. Over its doorway was inscribed the words “Enter to Learn” and on the opposite side, “Depart to Serve.”

In 1909 another teacher was hired for thirty dollars a month to direct the school’s educational program. This allowed Mary to devote herself to the business and administrative details. She traveled North to visit the homes of the Florida tourists she had met. They introduced her to neighbors, friends, church groups, and business associates. Mary never missed an opportunity to add to her growing list of supporters.

In 1910 only six years after her little school had opened, her home state asked her to don cap and gown at the South Carolina State College commencement exercises to receive an honorary Master of Science degree—the first of eleven honorary academic degrees awarded her.

Educating and training girls was only part of Mrs. Bethune’s vision. She was essentially a missionary, with all the meaning the word implies: making converts from “wrong doing” to “good doing” through the teachings of Christ. This profound spiritual drive expressed itself in social work. Distressed by the boys she saw in the streets throwing stones at random and playing with jackknives, she organized a boys club. Concerned about the labor camps and the quality of life endured by their inhabitants, Mrs. Bethune took her students to the camps to teach the children and to instruct the women in health, nutrition, and childcare.

As the midwife had declared at her birth, Mary was a visionary and her vision never seemed to grow dim. As property around the school went up for sale, she found ways to purchase it for expansion of the school, including a farm, library, hospital and dormitories. The curriculum also steadily expanded from eighth grade to high school to junior college to a four-year liberal arts college. In order for the school to remain a private institution, Mary knew that a broader financial base was essential. In 1923 Mary’s school merged with Cookman Institute, the first educational institution for black boys. By 1927 it was on its way to becoming a fully accredited liberal arts college. Bethune-Cookman College, as it was renamed was supported by the Board of Education of The Methodist Church. It remains one of the eleven historically black colleges supported by United Methodist Churches through our apportioned contributions to the denomination. Mary McLeod Bethune was President of the college from 1932 to 1942.

Mary Bethune’s activities for equal opportunity and civil rights for African Americans gained her national notoriety. When her college came under the auspices of The Methodist Church, she became a member of that denomination and served as a member to several General Conferences. She founded the National Council of Negro Women. She was a member of several organizations, not in name only, but as an active participant. She was called to Washington D.C. by five Presidents to serve on national commissions. Under Franklin Roosevelt she was Director of the Office of Minority Affairs for the National Youth Administration. She was selected as a consultant to the committee that drafted the United Nations Charter in 1945.

Despite her accomplishments, Mary was not immune to racism. In 1938 at meetings of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, she refused to go along with segregated seating. The meetings took place in Birmingham, Alabama, where the segregation ordinance was strictly upheld by a sheriff whose name would be more familiar in later years: Eugene “Bull” Connor.

To emphasize her point, she invited First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt to one of the meetings, and she also rejected the segregated seating arrangement. On one occasion she was asked to ride a freight elevator in a southern hotel, and indignantly took the long flight of stairs, although she suffered from chronic asthma. When she got to the hotel room she had an attack requiring medical attention. She was undaunted by physical danger, even standing down the Ku Klux Klan's attempted interference with black voter registration in Florida.

Until her death at the age of 79, Mary McLeod Bethune dedicated herself to inspiring youth. She believed the hope of the world depended upon youth and she had tried to make her own life a pattern. She dedicated herself to the civil rights and freedom of her black sisters and brothers. In standing firm for her own personal dignity, she was standing firm for the personal dignity of all blacks. Because of her efforts, women were counted among the new groups with legitimate demands that had to be taken into account on the national agenda. As a result, blacks, both men and women, were better prepared to go beyond "separate but equal" to demand integration into the nation's mainstream – a demand that would be pressed further by Martin Luther King, Jr.

In her last will and testament, Mary McLeod Bethune left this statement:

If I have a legacy to leave to my people, it is my philosophy of living and serving. I pray now that my philosophy may be helpful to those who share my vision of a world of peace.

Here, then, is my legacy...

I leave you love. I leave you hope. I leave you the challenge of developing confidence in one another. I leave you a thirst for education. I leave you a respect for the use of power. I leave you faith. I leave you racial dignity. I leave you a desire to live harmoniously with your fellow men. I leave you, finally, a responsibility to our young people.

Sources

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